Along the streets “where nobody watches, [but] everyone performs” walks a woman with large, kinky hair and an overelaborate and outmoded wool cape; a young man suddenly sprawls in the middle of the road; 15 cops surround a single and possibly bionic man for attempting to rob a bank (“on the street” 3). The open pavement becomes a stage on which the individual drama of everyone’s life plays out. Vivian Gornick stops to assess the New York City that she has grown up in, particularly the grimy and congested West Side where she always seems to find herself. “[M]y life seems to mirror an urban essence I prize,” she reflects, “the risk and excitement of having to put it all together anew. . . . Ah, the pleasures of conflict! The glamor of uncertainty! Hurrah for neurotic friendships and yea to incivility” (6)! In her essay collection approaching eye level, Gornick takes a close, hard look at the inevitability of her solitude in the city. It is “a tale of self-division from start to finish,” in which she reveals her simultaneous hunger for and hatred of self-creation (“tribute” 72).

In “on living alone,” Gornick adopts the opinion that solitude is perfectly manageable; it is a staple of a well-organized life. The city supplies her with all the evidence she needs. As she crosses the streets she notices couples in all directions: some evidently in love, some bored, others in deadpan isolation. Each romance is only an “intermittent attachment,” she claims (137). In a few months, half of these people will be walking with someone else, as one half of another couple. We mislabel this “perpetual regrouping” as companionship, she asserts, for it is neither the sentimental meeting of souls nor the intellectual union of minds (138). Gornick’s conception of friendship and intimacy in New York City is as cold and utilitarian as her prosaic diction suggests. Dryly, she dissects our romantic need for love into its crude, biological components: “we marry not for the adventure of self-discovery or a shared inner life, but for emotional solace of a primitive sort” (143). Here we are able to see the beginnings of her intricate argument for the appeal of solitude.
Solitude confers sophistication. Our desire for affection does not. In fact, she continues, the results of the latter are inevitably disappointing and estranging. In human relationships lacking “[s]hared temperament,” she sighs in weary resignation, “one is always walking on eggshells” (“university” 103). It is therefore only logical for her to conclude that human interaction is a burden we could well do without.

With the fierce rhetoric of a hardened ideologue, barely concealing her contempt for the clichés of love and other kitschy preoccupations, Gornick hotly declares: “[t]he myth of two-shall-become-one is no longer useful. Living consciously is the business of our lives” (“living alone” 144). As the feminists of the seventies then claimed, life is about tough-minded pragmatism and steady work is the answer to all questions of existential loneliness. So Gornick throws herself with wild abandon into the political movement for female independence. Yet, upon closer consideration, her tenacious beliefs and her willingness to give up love and domestic intimacy only belie her desperate need for human companionship. She frames her participation in the feminist movement as a glorious epiphany: “Like Arthur Koestler getting Marxism for the first time, it was as though light and music were bursting across the top of my skull. The exhilaration I felt once I had the analysis!” (“feminism” 63). In reality, however, her involvement was really a clutching at straws, a frantic reaching out for the camaraderie that feminism promised. Gornick’s marriage had previously crumbled into a shameful “failed intimacy,” and days during which no one called or none of her friends was available passed slowly, leaving her swamped in loneliness and in pain (“living alone” 140). Describing this period, she writes sentences long and interminable, heavily punctuated like fear “radiating out in waves from the pit of [her] stomach”:

I can recall a thousand mornings when I’ve awakened into the piercing sweetness of a summer day feeling as though my bed was anchored to a gray, unpeopled landscape, while just outside the window the world is bathed about in a fluid element and all the people in it are splashing about, brilliant with color, in pairs and in groups. (142)

The loneliness consumes her physically and mentally, and therefore when her work presents her with the opportunity to investigate “these
women’s libbers,” she embraces it with exhilaration, and perhaps even thankfulness for the reprieve it would provide from her solitude (“feminism” 62). This sounds like an elaborate excuse to cover up her need for companionship, and it was. She quietly confesses that she experiences the type of “loneliness [that] tells you you’re a fool and a loser. Everyone else is feasting, you alone cannot gain a seat at the banquet” (“the street” 6). At the deepest level, she does not feel herself “the right person for this life” (23). In these few and fleeting moments of vulnerability, we catch glimpses of Gornick as an isolated, middle-aged woman who intensely yearns for company and acceptance.

In “what feminism means to me,” Gornick embraces a thorough rejection of solitude: “everyone who had ever cared to investigate the nature of human loneliness had seen that only one’s own working mind breaks the solitude of the self” (68). She immerses herself in work. She “cultivate[s] acquaintanceships indiscriminately,” and can thus “be out every night of the week,” for it is the “[f]ear of loneliness” that she readily admits she is on the guard against (“living alone” 143). More than that, however, she has a less explicit but more profound fear of the introspection with her inner self that loneliness promises to evoke. Gornick clearly understands that each act committed “in absorbed solitude, is an act of faith,” which “assumes the presence of humanity” and allows “world and self [to be] generated from within” (“letter writing” 162). Yet she is unable to muster this intimacy with herself because she believes what she will see would shock her: the “grittiness” of incapacity and over-criticalness (“living alone” 146). She is terrified that discovering mediocrity and undesirability inside herself would perfectly explain why she does not get invited to gatherings of “the ones that count” (“university” 129).

Gornick’s fear of inadequacy translates into her need for recognition—and humiliation—from the people around her. The first time Gornick meets Rhoda Munk, author of the highly successful book *Women and Authority*, she is captivated by “the way the parts refused to come together,” by Munk’s nervousness, fragility, and her appearance: “a natural beauty made coarse and interesting by the life with which it had been forced to associate” (“tribute” 73). Munk has managed to conceive a book of such genius and wonder despite—or perhaps because of—her madness and inability that Gornick begins to worship her. After all, these are the very same features that she has struggled with, “what [she] most hated in [her]self” (99). In Munk, therefore,
Gornick finds hope in her own shortcomings. She feels thrilled to have “been chosen” to be a friend of someone this extraordinary (81). In her rapture at being able to perfectly align with a personality far greater and more publicly admired, Gornick mistakes the approval that she believes Munk has bestowed upon her for self-possession: “[i]t wasn’t that I came away thinking my words brilliant, it was only that I came away feeling I had been fully heard, and because I was being fully heard. . . . Now I had it. I could breathe easy” (77). The multitude of “I”s exposes the fact that self-conviction is something she is unused to, so when she has it she has to flaunt it as an overly enthusiastic child would. Like her involvement in the feminist movement, Gornick’s reverence for Munk gives her the false impression that she is getting back more of herself and that she has a personal voice which is only becoming louder.

The key to overcoming her insecurity, Gornick believes, lies in personal expression, the kind that “one might get from a poem not a memo; a piece of intimacy” offered by a person and received fully by another (“letter writing” 160). “I value the expressiveness above all else,” she proclaims, for unlike everything else, it makes her hopeful (“the street” 10). On Ninth Avenue she watches a woman speak of her melancholy with curling fingers and clenched fists, while Gornick stands “amazed by her eloquence” (13). She loves her friends for “the shape of their sentences,” how they make her own grow “full and free,” completing her own thoughts (“university” 101). She reminisces about the disappearance of cafes and the flowing narratives they generate. She mourns the death of letter writing. For Gornick, remaining fully expressive through meaningful conversation and writing is “the noble enterprise,” one that requires time and “the quiet within. . . . To be alone in the presence of one’s own thought” (“letter writing” 164, 163). Expression therefore has the ultimate, individual power of clarification: it allows us “to make sense of things, penetrate [our] own chaos, and figure out what [we feel]” (162). With our renewed self-possession we confidently extend a piece of ourselves to someone else.

Yet, despite the vociferousness of Gornick’s claims, we realize that she does not take part in such expression. She stays silent and watchful on the receiving margins of the exchanges in her experience. She softly acknowledges that “[e]very time the urge to write a letter dies stillborn in me I am making the world I rail against. I set the narrative impulse adrift” (“letter
writing” 164). Why does she not seize back the narrative, engage in the expression, and find herself as well as the ability to reach out to someone else?

Perhaps at the heart of Gornick’s loneliness and passivity is an uncompromising—and punishing—desire for perfection. Perfection in the way she reaches out, perfection in the way she is received, perfection within herself. In her mind the ideal form of communication is one in which “the mesh [between temperaments] must be perfect. Not approximate, perfect. Otherwise the gears refuse to turn” (“university” 103). Though she longs “to narrate not to transmit; to enlarge upon the moment; impose shape; achieve form,” her inner voice tells her that she is inadequate, that she will necessarily fail in both form and intent (“letter writing” 160). So instead she settles for the easier channel of “quick, flashing sentence fragments,” which do not leave a piece of her open to the possibility of rejection (160). She gives up expressiveness because to be expressive is to be vulnerable, and “[because] it is hard to heal,” particularly when vulnerable, she insists, “I must defend myself: close off, grow scar tissue, thicken my hide” (“university” 135). Her prose, consequently, is void of raw and intense feeling. In “on the street,” the adamance of her statement “I’m happy. Happy and relieved. Relieved and free. I feel free” only convinces us of the contrary (29). Furthermore, she often uses the third-person perspective to detail grief and pain: “[o]ne cannot really live with emptiness. . . . Either one breaks out, or one becomes inured” (“at the university” 136). From a distance, she is safe from fragility and scars—she will remain fully intact, in the guarded perfection of loneliness.

Gornick thereby resolves that “[l]ife . . . whatever its size or composition, depends on walking the straight and narrow of the moment” (“catskills” 45). And so she silently walks, untouchable, from one end of Manhattan to the other in the midst of the crowd. Privately, she relishes being “jostled and bumped, catching the eye of the stranger, feeling the stranger’s touch” (“the street” 8). She tells herself that the tenderness of “impersonal affection,” unconditional and uncomplicated, is good enough for her (8). But it cannot last. To clear the melancholy and fill the void of loneliness, Gornick is condemned to be a walker until the very end. She has to keep walking, to seek warmth in the city’s generic and “heedless expressiveness” (7). If she stops she will give way. Every day on the streets of New York she will see “the fifty different ways people struggle to remain human until the very last minute—the
variety and inventiveness of survival techniques” (9). Here, she can remind herself that in her loneliness she is not alone—“Never am I less alone than alone in the crowded street” (9). If personal relationships cannot sustain her, stubborn hope will. She will, in time, learn how to live alone and be contentedly independent, as others have done before her.

*approaching eye level* maps the path from promises of love, marriage, and community to the disappointments they inevitably become. Gornick writes to find out what went wrong where, and why human connection is so flawed and unsatisfying. She does not find the answer that we perhaps have been expecting, some secret formula to pull us all just a little closer, rather than apart. Yet, the very manifestation of her expressiveness through the essay collection answers a question far bigger than that concerning loneliness. She addresses the question of life, its constant struggles, and the strength of both despair and hope. Gornick believes that we are all really bound by “the common refusal to go under,” that we find encouragement in our shared despondence as we fight collectively to “[escape] the prison sentence of personal history into the promise of an open destiny (“on the street” 9, 11). The future holds possibilities that can free us from past pains, and so Gornick resolves to keep walking day after day. Perhaps someday she will see a reflection of herself in the glass on the streets, and recognize it as one of those fifty ways in which the human survives. With some tenacity, we can all get there too.

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“at the university: little murders of the soul.” 101-36.
“the catskills remembered.” 30-61.
“on letter writing.” 150-64.
“on living alone.” 137-49.
“on the street: nobody watches, everybody performs.” 1-29.
“tribute.” 71-100.
“what feminism means to me.” 62-70.